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Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Central African Republic

Summary

The present report is prepared pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and is presented to the Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict as the first country report on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Central African Republic. It covers the period from January 2007 to November 2008.

The report focuses on grave violations perpetrated against children in the Central African Republic and identifies parties to the conflict, both State and non-State actors, who commit grave abuses against children. In particular, the report highlights the fact that children have been consistently recruited and used by non-State armed groups, including Government-backed self-defence militias. The report shows worrisome trends of rapes and other grave sexual violence perpetrated by all parties to the conflict throughout the territory. The report also notes the systematic and widespread use of abductions, especially in the north-west, by non-State armed groups and armed bandits as a means of recruiting children and to threaten and extort ransom from the population.

The report also emphasizes the security vacuum in the Central African Republic and the lack of governmental capacities to protect the population. The recent deadlock in the peace negotiations, the withdrawal of some parties to the conflict from the political dialogue and the volatility of the security environment, especially with armed conflict resuming in October and November 2008, create an environment in which violations against children are committed in a climate of impunity. The state of extreme poverty and deprivation of the population, as well as the spillover from conflicts in neighbouring Chad and the Sudan, aggravate the already alarming situation in the Central African Republic.

The report acknowledges the significant challenges in addressing grave violations against children in the Central African Republic and outlines a series of recommendations to put an end to these violations.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared on the basis of the inclusion of the Central African Republic in the workplan of the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict, in December 2007, following the listing of parties recruiting and using children in the Central African Republic, in the annexes of my seventh report on children and armed conflict (S/2007/757). The parties listed in my seventh report are: Armée populaire pour la restauration de la République et de la démocratie (APRD); Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement (UFDR); and Forces démocratiques populaires de Centrafrique (FDPC). The establishment of a mechanism in the Central African Republic to monitor and report grave violations against children is currently ongoing under the framework of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005). In this regard, a task force to implement the monitoring and reporting mechanism has been created under the leadership of the United Nations.

II. Overview of the political, military and security situation

A. Background and recent developments

2. Since its independence in 1958, the Central African Republic has experienced intermittent but serious political, social and institutional challenges. The current President, François Bozizé, attained power in 2003 following a protracted rebellion, and was democratically elected in 2005. However, like that of his predecessor Ange-Félix Patassé, his tenure has been marked by a state of permanent rebellion that has had dire humanitarian consequences. In addition to violations committed by rebel groups, the national armed forces, particularly the Presidential Guard, have also been responsible for widespread human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions. This has provoked massive displacement of the population. Thousands of people have fled to forest hideouts where they lack even the most basic means for survival. Several rebel groups are active throughout the territory of the Central African Republic, with a high concentration of such forces in the northern regions.

3. The Government of the Central African Republic signed the Sirte Peace Agreement on 2 February 2007 with FDPC, the Birao Peace Agreement in April 2007 with UFDR, and a Ceasefire and Peace Agreement on 9 May 2008 with APRD. A Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed with both APRD and UFDR on 21 June 2008 in Libreville, under the aegis of President Bongo of Gabon. FDPC did not have any representative in Libreville but recognizes the validity of the agreement. The Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice (MLCJ) also signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on 7 December 2008. The document remains open to signature by all other armed groups.

4. The emphasis of the political process throughout 2008 was on the organization of an inclusive political dialogue to foster national reconciliation and put an end to the cycle of politico-military instability that has affected the country for the past decade. The long-anticipated Inclusive Political Dialogue opened in Bangui on 8 December 2008. In preparation for the process, an inclusive Dialogue Preparatory Committee was established on 30 November 2007 and it submitted its conclusions to President Bozizé on 25 April 2008. It recommended, inter alia, the signing of a

peace agreement between the Government of the Central African Republic and APRD, the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement between the Government of the Central African Republic and all politico-military groups, and the adoption of appropriate legislative and judicial measures to foster inclusivity.

5. Early in August 2008 the consultations on the Inclusive Political Dialogue stalled over the issue of amnesty, with UFDR and APRD suspending their participation. The impasse was overcome after extensive consultations led by my Special Representative in the Central African Republic, which culminated in Libreville on 15 September 2008, with a Follow-up Committee of the Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement. During the meeting, the APRD President, Jean-Jacques Demafouth, announced the return of the movement into the peace process.

6. A consolidated Amnesty Law was promulgated by President Bozizé on 13 October 2008. It covers violations committed by Government security and defence forces and rebels from March 2003 to October 2008. It also provides amnesty to former President Felix Patassé, APRD President Jean-Jacques Demafouth, and FDPC leader Martin Koumtamadji (alias Abdoulaye Miskine), and to all members of their respective forces for the embezzlement of public funds and assassinations, among other offences. However, eligibility for amnesty carries a number of preconditions, including the cantonment, demobilization and disarmament of fighting forces within 60 days of the promulgation of the Amnesty Law. Considering this short time frame, which was especially challenged by APRD, an incremental approach was adopted early in November 2008, with anticipated demobilization activities to begin early in 2009. On 25 October 2008, the Government of the Central African Republic released from detention 12 fighters from APRD, UFDR and FDPC, in fulfilment of its own obligations under the agreement.

7. It should also be noted that the preparations for the inclusive political dialogue took place against the backdrop of increased tensions between Government forces and rebel groups in the north of the country. Several violent clashes were reported between the Forces armées centrafricaines (FACA) and APRD in various localities in the north-west. In one of the worst clashes in the central north, at least nine Government soldiers were killed when their convoy was ambushed by FDPC on 11 November 2008. In the north-east, the ceasefire between Government forces and UFDR elements under the Birao Peace Agreement have by and large been holding, despite increased activities by splinter groups such as MLCJ and the Forces pour l'unification de la Republique centrafricaine (FURCA). Road bandits, locally known as Zaraguinas or *coupeurs de route*, continue to operate with impunity in the northern areas. Self-defence groups, created initially to protect the local populations against bandits, have now turned into very well-organized armed militias backed by the Government in its fight against rebel groups.

8. The situation in the south-eastern region of Haut-Mbomou, which experienced a major incursion by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) between February and March 2008, continues to be a source of concern owing to the virtual absence of State authority. There are indications that LRA elements are using territory of the Central African Republic for resupply. They are responsible for the abduction and recruitment of children, sexual violence, and the looting of villages.

9. The volatile regional context also poses serious threats to the effective implementation of peace processes in the Central African Republic. Out of six

neighbouring countries, four suffer from similar internal conflicts which have exacerbated instability in the Central African Republic. Frequent incursions of the Chadian Armed Forces in the north, Sudanese rebels in the east, and recent attacks of LRA elements in the south-east, further destabilize the fragile security environment.

B. Armed forces and groups operating in the Central African Republic

1. Government and multinational forces

Forces armées centrafricaines

10. The Forces armées centrafricaines (FACA) is a force of approximately 5,000 soldiers. The Presidential Guard is a force of 800 to 1,000 soldiers representing the elite of the Armed Forces. There have been persistent allegations of human rights violations perpetrated by FACA and the Presidential Guard. The Gendarmerie nationale, who amount to approximately 1,300 gendarmes, have comparatively greater credibility in the eyes of the population.

Mission for the consolidation of peace in the Central African Republic

11. The Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in the Central African Republic (MICOPAX, formerly the Multinational Force of the Central African Republic) is a regional peacekeeping force, made of troops from Cameroon, the Congo (Brazzaville), Gabon and Chad. They are deployed in Bangui and in the north, with a mandate to protect populations and support security sector reform activities. The mission has brought relative security to some rural areas but the presence of Chadian peacekeepers and integrated FACA soldiers may compromise the perception of neutrality of the mission.

United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad

12. The United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT), established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1778 (2007), consists of 200 European Union-led force (EUFOR) troops based in Vakaga (north-eastern part of the territory bordering Chad). The present mandate, ending in March 2009, is to secure the area of Birao and to protect refugees and humanitarian workers and aid convoys.

2. Rebel groups and other non-State armed elements

Armée populaire pour la restauration de la république et de la démocratie

13. The Armée populaire pour la restauration de la république et de la démocratie (APRD) was created late in 2005. The political leader is Jean-Jacques Demafouth and its military chief is Laurent Djim Weï. It has been mainly active in the north-west and central north. APRD consists of several hundred poorly equipped (mostly with artisanal weapons) soldiers, but their acute knowledge of the terrain and a strict control over the local populations give them a comparative advantage. To date, APRD remains the most active armed group.

Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement

14. This coalition of three smaller groups was created in September 2006 and is active in the Vakaga and Haute-Kotto regions (north-east). It consists of several hundred soldiers under the leadership of Zakaria Damane. At present UFDR is actively collaborating with FACA and EUFOR/MINURCAT forces on security in this area.

Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain

15. FDPC is led by Abdoulaye Miskine, currently in exile in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. It is based in the central north (mostly in the prefectures of Nana-Grebizi and Ouham) and consists of several hundred soldiers mostly originating from the region. It is significantly better equipped than any other armed group in the Central African Republic, with new uniforms and limited heavy weaponry. It had not been considered a threat to security during most of the reporting period until the November 2008 ambush against FACA soldiers in central north.

Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice

16. Led by Abakar Sabone (originally one of the UFDR founders), MLCJ recently split from UFDR and consists of no more than a few dozen poorly equipped soldiers but builds legitimacy through ethnic rivalries and the feeling of stigmatization of some populations.

Forces pour l'unification de la Republique centrafricaine

17. Relatively little is known about this newly created armed group. It appears to consist of several dozen soldiers operating in the north-east (Vakaga) led by Oumar Younouss (alias Sodiam), who claims the support of populations marginalized by UFDR. It appears to benefit from the support of neighbouring countries.

Zaraguinas

18. Also known as *coupeurs de routes* or road bandits, Zaraguinas operate in all parts of the Central African Republic but with a particularly high concentration in the north and north-west. Zaraguinas represent a major security threat in the Central African Republic, often attacking humanitarian convoys and abducting and ransoming populations. They have different levels of organization and capacity and they are not a homogenous group. Zaraguinas often come from the Central African Republic, the Sudan, Chad or Cameroon, and sometimes even from Mali or Uganda. On occasion they have also been made up of elements from Central African Republic rebel groups or from the Chadian and Central African Republic armed forces. Confrontations between Zaraguinas and rebel groups or FACA are very common.

Self-defence groups

19. There has been a significant increase in the number and activities of self-defence militias since the beginning of 2008, especially in the north-west. They are often constituted at the village level as a response to attacks by Zaraguinas. There are indications that some militias have been constituted expressly on the initiative and/or with support of the Central African Republic Ministry of the Interior. There

are further indications that in general self-defence militias and groups operating in the Central African Republic are backed by the Government and armed with the assistance of local authorities. They have also been used as auxiliaries to FACA for operations against Zaraguinas, and increasingly against APRD. In some villages, these militias amount to 10 to 15 per cent of the overall population.

3. Foreign armed elements

Chadian Armed Forces

20. According to informal agreements between the Governments of the Central African Republic and Chad, the Chadian Armed Forces provide FACA with military support for their operations in the north, within 60 kilometres of the Chadian border. Elements of the Chadian Armed Forces regularly enter the territory of the Central African Republic to fight against rebels in the north, who are considered a threat to the Governments of both the Central African Republic and Chad.

Lord's Resistance Army

21. Joseph Kony's LRA, which originated in Uganda, is now known to operate from the north-western Democratic Republic of the Congo. Elements of LRA allegedly entered the territory of the Central African Republic four times between February and March 2008 and are responsible for exactions against the population.

Sudanese Tora Bora

22. Through most of the reporting period, Sudanese Tora Bora are known to have used the Central African Republic as a base for their rebel operations in the Sudan. However, they no longer seem to be based in the Central African Republic.

III. Grave violations against children: trends and incidents

A. Context of grave violations

23. The Central African Republic continues to have some of the worst child survival indicators in Africa. Given the poor human rights situation and the humanitarian crisis, children are particularly vulnerable to a range of grave violations, including the six violations as listed under Security Council resolution 1539 (2004). Children are the primary victims of the conflict, often recruited, forcibly displaced or abducted, and lacking access to basic life necessities such as food and clean water, or health and education services.

24. Fighting and threats against the population by all parties to the conflict have forced thousands to flee their homes. Patterns of displacement in the Central African Republic fall into two categories, although the lines between the two are often blurred. In the first case, populations leave their villages in an organized manner and stay in the bush for a few days. Such "preventive" displacement or coping strategy is usually provoked by rumours of movements of armed forces and groups or Zaraguinas. In the second case, displacement is a reaction to unexpected attacks on villages by armed forces and groups or Zaraguinas, and populations typically have no time to organize their escape and leave without any basic necessities and goods. They may hide in the bush, move from one village to the other, or end up in the

internally displaced persons camp of Kabo (central north). In this unpredictable context, children are particularly vulnerable as they might be left behind, or suffer grave violations such as abduction and recruitment, killing and maiming, and sexual violence. It is estimated that children account for half of the total number of the internally displaced population, and these children also lack access to basic education and health services.

25. The lack of birth registration processes in the Central African Republic is also a critical concern as it exacerbates the challenges related to addressing grave violations against children. According to official Government statistics, only 49 per cent of births are registered nationally, and 36 per cent in rural areas.

B. Recruitment and use of children

26. Children have been allegedly recruited by all non-State parties to the conflict in the reporting period. The highly volatile security situation in the north, with ongoing fighting and acts of banditry and subsequent displacement of populations, increases the risks of child recruitment. Therefore, the recruitment and use of children is occurring particularly in the context of non-State armed groups operating in the northern part of the Central African Republic. The emergence of self-defence militias and their increasing use by the Government as auxiliary armed elements is also becoming a source of major concern in terms of the use of children.

27. The absence of development, poor access to basic services, lack of economic and social opportunities, stigmatization of certain groups, whether ethnic, religious or social (nomadic communities are demonized as a threat to local populations) are factors that increase the risk of child recruitment.

28. Constraints related to access and birth registration or age determination has significantly impacted the capacity of the humanitarian community to determine the full scope of the phenomenon of child recruitment and use. Furthermore, the regional and cross-border dimensions of the conflict, the different characters of the armed forces and groups operating in the Central African Republic, and the shifting alliances and splintering of groups, has exacerbated the challenge of determining where the children are recruited, who specifically recruits them, and what they are used for.

29. It should be noted that during the reporting period, there have been some positive developments regarding the anticipated release of children from APRD and UFDR, following concerted advocacy of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and humanitarian non-governmental organization (NGO) partners, as well as the visit in May 2008 of my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict to the region. However, the deadlock in the peace negotiations and the subsequent withdrawal of major parties to the conflict from the Comprehensive Peace Dialogue in August 2008, stalled the implementation of the commitments to release children. To date, relatively few children have actually been released and there may also have been new recruitment.

North-west

30. APRD openly recruits children into its ranks but claims that they are not used as active combatants. This recruitment is reportedly mainly voluntary, driven by continuous insecurity, feelings of ethnic stigmatization and lack of access to all basic services. APRD recently identified 250 children for release and reintegration, but United Nations system agencies and child protection partners estimate that there may be more associated children. The initial identification of 100 children in November 2008 showed the majority to be between the ages of 12 to 17 years, with some cases of children of 9 and 10 years. Many claim to have joined voluntarily, and all of them were associated with the armed group for 2 to 4 years. No girls have been identified as yet, but the presence of a few girls has been reported. Indicative cases of recruitment of children by APRD during the reporting period are noted as follows:

(a) Three boys aged 15 to 18 years reported that they joined APRD in Paoua in 2006 owing to poverty and lack of economic opportunities. They indicated that they were mistreated and forced to steal food and money from their communities. In April 2008, they escaped and now live in constant fear of reprisals;

(b) Three brothers aged 9 to 14 years joined APRD in November 2006. They are presently waiting for formal separation in a cantonment camp near Paoua, after having been identified by the United Nations;

(c) Three boys aged 12 to 15 years reported to the United Nations they have been used as active combatants since they joined APRD in 2005.

31. Self-defence militias and groups have also recruited and used children. Motivations include social recognition, a lack of access to basic services, material benefits, and in some cases hopes of future integration into the national armed forces. Although many boys seem to volunteer to join these militias, pressure from peers and local authorities, including religious leaders, is also a factor. The presence of children in these groups remains a highly sensitive topic and the official positions of *sous-préfets* and local recruiters is that militia members are generally over the age of 18 years. However, they also admit that some of the individuals associated with the militias may be between 14 and 18 years of age, having joined because of a lack of opportunities for education or because they failed in school. There is no policy of age limits during the recruitment process, which has encouraged many underage boys to join. As a result, the presence of armed children on the main roads leading from Bossangoa to Bouar and Bocaranga has increasingly been witnessed and reported. In November 2008, the United Nations met with boys in Yambo, 60 km from Bocaranga, who claimed that they were proud to be part of the self-defence group because they protect their village against bandits and rebels.

32. Most of these groups claim to be autonomous and constituted as a response to insecurity. However, reports indicate that many self-defence militias are highly organized, especially in the region of Ouham-Pendé. The local militia coordinator reported to the United Nations that there are 2,092 militia members in this region. The recruitment process involves the choice of reliable young people by local leaders in areas under their control. They transmit the names of the youth to the local coordinator and to the *sous-préfets* and *préfet* who then pass on the lists to local police and judiciary authorities, and to the Central African Republic Ministries of the Interior and Defence.

Central north and north-east

33. Reports indicate that APRD seems not to recruit children as combatants in the central north, owing mainly to the strict control of the local commander, who wishes to send a positive message both to the population and to the international community. However, because many APRD rebels live in the communities, United Nations system agencies suspect that children might be used as messengers or for other auxiliary tasks.

34. Incidents of recruitment in the north-east in the reporting period mainly relate to activities of UFDR. However, to date, UFDR claims that it has released all formerly associated children to their communities.

35. During UFDR attacks on FACA and French army positions in Birao on 3 and 4 March 2007, some of the rebels were reportedly identified as former students of the Birao governmental secondary school. Many of them, aged 12 to 17 years, were killed. In March 2008, a group of 70 children, including 15 girls, who were released from UFDR in 2007 were registered and interviewed by the United Nations and NGO partners in eastern villages of Ouanda-Djallé, Tahala, Seregobo and Koumbal in Vakaga region. Most of them were between the ages of 11 and 17 years during their period of association with the armed group, and indicated that they had been associated from a few months to a year and a half. Almost all of the boys claimed that they had joined voluntarily and 45 per cent had served as active combatants, particularly those who were originally from UFDR strongholds. None of the 15 girls participated in active combat, and all but 2 were forcibly recruited. Children also reported various types of mistreatment such as imprisonment, having to carry very heavy loads or being physically beaten for refusing to fight. Girls reported sexual harassment or incidents of rape.

South-east

36. Although this area of the country has not been affected by the ongoing conflict, the four LRA attacks on villages in the Obo area in February and March 2008 led to significant abductions and recruitments of children. In March 2008, the United Nations established a joint mission composed of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security of the Secretariat and UNICEF to evaluate the humanitarian and security situation. It found that some of the attackers were reportedly under the age of 15 years. Testimonies of the 35 adults who were abducted and later released by LRA indicated that the 55 children who had been abducted during the attacks were now used as soldiers or for auxiliary tasks, and that girls were used as sexual slaves.

C. Killing and maiming

37. Because of the local nature of the conflict and the limited use of heavy weaponry, massive indiscriminate killing of civilians, including children, is not a systematic pattern in the Central African Republic. However, significant numbers of incidents of killing and maiming of children have been reported. The attacks on and the burning of villages by all parties to the conflict have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of children. Deaths of children have also occurred during the looting of

villages by rebels, during acts of reprisal by Government forces in retaliation for strikes by rebels, and in attacks by Zaraguinas. Indicative examples of the killing and maiming of children include:

(a) On 19 August 2007, a girl was killed after members of FACA opened fire in a village in the area of Markounda (north-west) in response to an ambush by rebels a few days earlier;

(b) On 2-3 September 2007, three school boys aged 16 to 17 years were reportedly killed by members of APRD around Bodjomo (north-west) on their way back from Yamodo (Southern Chad);

(c) On 17 December 2007, in Mira (central north), Zaraguinas reportedly killed three girls and their pregnant mother during an attack. The same day, in Bekondjo, four children, including three boys and one girl, were killed in a similar attack;

(d) On 11 November 2008, the chief of the village of Kete Sido (central north) was killed with his wife and one of his children when FDPC rebels ambushed a FACA patrol on the Moyenne Sido-Kabo axis.

38. In addition, Zaraguinas are increasingly attacking villages in retaliation for the activities of self-defence groups, killing children and youth suspected of being part of militias. In December 2007, for instance, all of the men from a village on the Bozoum/Bouar axis were gathered and executed, 11 men died but a 15-year-old boy survived after feigning death. The gunshot wounds he sustained have left him severely injured.

D. Rape and other grave sexual violence

39. Preliminary reports indicate that incidents of rapes and other grave sexual violence are a critical concern in the Central African Republic, although such incidents are severely underreported. Therefore, the full scope of the problem is not sufficiently understood and this has also hampered response initiatives. All parties to the conflict are responsible for rapes and other grave sexual violence. Domestic violence is also of concern and remains greatly linked to the conflict and the subsequent general breakdown of law and order. There remains a high level of impunity for such crimes against children, and victims typically suffer stigmatization in their communities. Indicative incidents of rape and grave sexual violence during the reporting period include:

(a) In Bouar (north-west), a 12-year-old girl was raped by a FACA soldier on 1 November 2007;

(b) In a village between Bozoum and Paoua (north-west), a 15-year-old girl was raped and her belongings burned by an APRD rebel in August 2008;

(c) Fifteen girls who were released from UFDR were interviewed by the United Nations in March 2008: five girls, aged 14 to 17 years, indicated that they were regularly sexually harassed by members of the armed group (January-March 2007), and three girls aged 11, 15 and 17 years reported they were either raped or gang raped by the rebels (December 2006-June 2007).

40. Interviews undertaken with internally displaced persons from the Behily, Croisement Moissala and Bocayanga axis (central north) in Kabo in February and November 2008, also showed that Zaraguinas are responsible for acts of sexual violence and rape during their attacks. According to the internally displaced persons, these incidents are the main reason why they left their villages. Girls are reportedly abducted and taken into the bush for several days to be raped and/or to carry goods that have been stolen by Zaraguinas. Testimonies show that bandits usually target 8- to 12-year-old girls.

E. Abductions of children

41. The abduction of children in the Central African Republic, especially in the northern areas, is a critical concern. These acts are frequent and systematic and are perpetrated mostly by rebels groups and Zaraguinas for the purpose of recruitment or to extort ransom money. There have also been abductions by LRA during several incursions into the Central African Republic.

42. Zaraguinas reportedly abduct children in the north-west, particularly for payment of ransoms. Nomadic communities, such as the Peuhls, are especially targeted because they are known to own livestock that could be sold to pay ransoms. As a result, cultural patterns are changing with nomadic groups increasingly getting rid of their livestock and choosing sedentarization as a way to avoid abductions. Road bandits also abduct children, especially girls, in the central north, raping them for several days in the bush before releasing them, or using them for carrying goods. Indicative incidents of abductions during the reporting period include:

(a) On 3 February 2008, in Bemal (north-west), an 8-year-old boy was abducted along with his 27-year-old brother by six members of APRD. The victims were released following the intervention of an APRD local commander and the payment of 4,000 CFA francs (US$ 10);

(b) Between February and March 2008, LRA elements reportedly abducted 157 people, including 55 children (40 boys and 15 girls) in the area of Obo (south-east). According to the March 2008 United Nations joint mission, these figures are probably underestimations. To date, 35 people have been released but none of the 55 children and none of the pregnant women. Forty-three of the abducted children are under 15 years of age;

(c) In January 2007, two Peuhl sisters, aged 5 and 6 years, were abducted by Zaraguinas in Tatali (40 kms from Bozoum, north-west) along with 22 other children. The oldest one was regularly beaten. They were released to their family after the payment of 200,000 CFA francs ($500).

F. Attacks on schools and hospitals

43. Incidents of schools being targeted by Zaraguinas for the purpose of abducting children have been reported in the area of Bozoum (north-west). These events led to families refusing to send their children to school. The lack of security on the main roads and the burning of hundreds of villages since 2005, including schools and health centres, also add to this context and as a result, many children have not been sent to schools for months or years in areas highly affected by the conflict.

44. Schools and health centres have been destroyed as villages have been attacked and burned by all parties to the conflict in the northern part of the Central African Republic. Schools have also closed in the reporting period owing to insecurity or the displacement of populations. Two of the three schools in Birao (north-east) were also partially destroyed by FACA and UFDR during the fighting in March 2007.

G. Denial of humanitarian access

45. In the reporting period, there have been fluctuating trends in humanitarian access in the Central African Republic. The deadlocks of the political dialogue, the continuing insecurity, the rainy seasons and the lack of infrastructure such as roads have made it difficult for humanitarian convoys and staff to access some parts of the country. Zaraguinas activities also continue throughout the northern parts of the country, causing a general sense of insecurity. Attacks are also increasingly being reported further south, and it is believed that these are likely to worsen with the onset of the dry season. Zaraguinas are responsible for several attacks on United Nations and NGO personnel, including robbery, intimidation, and acts of violence, with some fatalities being reported. Indicative incidents of targeting of humanitarian personnel and goods during the reporting period include:

(a) In November 2007, on the road leading from Batangafo to Kabo (central north), an NGO vehicle was stopped by Zaraguinas. Members of local staff were beaten up and the international worker was sexually harassed and her clothes forcibly taken off;

(b) In March 2008, in Gordil (north-east), an NGO was attacked by Zaraguinas who shot at their vehicle, killing one woman and stealing goods;

(c) On 6 May 2008, two United Nations trucks delivering humanitarian supplies were attacked 12 kms from Bossambele (north-west) by Zaraguinas. The first truck tried to escape and was fired upon and the driver was injured. The second was stopped and the driver was beaten up and money was stolen;

(d) On 11 November 2008, young people in Bossangoa (north-west) attacked a United Nations truck delivering humanitarian supplies, stealing food. They claimed that the United Nations was feeding APRD rebels while populations were starving.

46. Because of the general sense of insecurity, displacements of populations and continuing fighting, some humanitarian activities have also been suspended, with dire consequences on the populations and on children in particular. In May 2008, three health centres in Gwankira, Croisement Moissala and Bocayanga (central north) were closed when beneficiaries and local staff members were forced to flee because of the threat of armed conflict. Since then only two of these centres have reopened. To date, the road leading from Croisement Moissala to Behily is still considered too dangerous and is not used by United Nations system agencies and partners owing to continued insecurity. As a result, populations leaving on this axis are deprived of humanitarian assistance. Ongoing military operations throughout the country also impeded the unrestricted passage of humanitarian convoys and staff, both local and international. In early September 2008, APRD destroyed bridges leading from Paoua (north-west) to Chad in order to prevent movements of FACA,

MICOPAX and Chadian forces. This resulted in the suspension of United Nations and NGO activities in the area since then.

47. Restrictions on passage of convoys or staff have also been increasingly reported since July 2008, especially in the north-west. Official and non-official Government and APRD checkpoints have become more intrusive, targeting vehicles carrying international or local humanitarian staff. As a result, delays in providing assistance and goods to the population are becoming more frequent. In August 2008, a fuel truck rented by a United Nations system agency and flying a United Nations flag was stopped and taxed repeatedly by APRD, FACA, the Presidential Guard, forest rangers and the police. The driver was delayed by one day because of a lack of money. Humanitarian personnel (especially local staff) were also reportedly stopped at APRD checkpoints and accused of spying, with threats made against them, including death threats. Following the high-level advocacy led by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the situation has improved significantly since September 2008.

IV. Dialogue with parties to the conflict and action plans

48. My Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict visited the Central African Republic from 26 to 31 May 2008 to assess at first hand the situation of children in the framework of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005). The purpose of the visit was also to establish dialogue with the parties to the conflict listed in the annexes to my seventh report on children and armed conflict (S/2007/757). In this context, my Special Representative met with the leadership of APRD in the north-west and UFDR in the north-east. On the strength of the concerted and ongoing advocacy efforts led by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UNICEF, my Special Representative received commitments of APRD and UFDR to prepare, with the support of the United Nations, concrete and time-bound action plans to prevent the recruitment and use of children, and to identify and release to UNICEF and other child protection partners children in their ranks. They also committed to actions to prevent other grave violations against children. An initial group of 100 children was identified by APRD in November 2008, to be separated from the group and transferred to UNICEF and NGO partners for reintegration into their communities.

49. To date, no formal action plans in line with Security Council resolution 1539 (2004) have been signed with any party to the conflict. However, agreements for the separation and reintegration of children have been signed with UFDR in June 2007 and a formal agreement with APRD is still under discussion. It is expected that these commitments and agreements will be formally translated into child soldier action plans in the course of 2009. It is also anticipated that the United Nations will enter into dialogue with other parties to the conflict towards the preparation of action plans to address the recruitment and use of child soldiers and for commitments to address other grave violations against children.

V. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and programmatic response

50. To date, there is no formal disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process in the Central African Republic. The Government has proposed a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme for rebel combatants, and a working group has been established to determine implementation modalities. The report of the working group was formally adopted by the third meeting of the Follow-up Committee in Libreville on 20 November 2008.

51. Following a tripartite agreement signed with UNICEF and the Government in June 2007, UFDR provided a list of 500 children who had been released to their communities. From April 2007 to May 2008, UNICEF registered 237 of these children. In many cases, age verification was difficult as no birth registration services are available in the region. Interviews showed that most of the children participated directly in hostilities from April 2006 to April 2007. Ten per cent of the children were between the ages of 10 and 12 and were mostly used to carry ammunitions, food or water during the fighting. The average time of association varies from three months to one year, but some children had been associated with other rebel groups in this area for three years. Almost all of the children declared that they joined UFDR because of the lack of economic opportunities and of access to basic services, and because of feelings of ethnic stigmatization. Finally, most of the children interviewed had no educational background and are now engaged in activities such as agriculture, fishing and hunting to support their families.

52. The rebel group claims that another group of 49 children were released to their families and communities in September 2007, but this has not yet been verified by United Nations system agencies and partners. This raises a number of protection concerns related to the fact that this last group was mainly made up of children from Chad or areas still under APRD control. There are also worrisome reports that a number of released children are currently working in gold fields in the north of Haute-Kotto (Sam Ouandja and Ouadda areas, in the north-east). To date, lack of funding, coordination and coherence has impeded reintegration programmes for children who have been released by UFDR. However, UNICEF and other United Nations system agencies and partners are now prepared to resume the process.

53. Strategic partnerships on the prevention of recruitment and on the release and reintegration of children in APRD- and UFDR-controlled areas have recently been formalized with four humanitarian NGOs, namely the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Danish Refugee Council, Comité d'aide médicale and the International Medical Corps-United Kingdom. This community-based programme foresees support for the release and reintegration of hundreds of children associated with armed groups in the northern areas. Three transit interim care centres are currently being built in the north-western districts. An emergency site to receive released children is already operational in the north-west.

54. This three-year programme will also address other child protection issues more generally, including the prevention of gender-based violence. Activities are framed to reach some 300,000 children and women affected by the armed conflict, including the most vulnerable populations such as internally displaced persons, victims of sexual violence, returnees and host communities. It will actively engage

all relevant United Nations system agencies and programmes, as well as BONUCA, NGO partners and the authorities through various Government ministries.

55. Of the $10 million that the Peacebuilding Fund allocated to the Central African Republic in November 2008, $2 million is to be dedicated to programmes for the separation of children from armed groups and their reintegration into communities. However, the projected cost of these programmes is $6.5 million. In this regard, additional funds must be raised as a matter of priority. Furthermore, prospects of the release of children cannot be isolated from the overall political dialogue, especially now that formal disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes are being prepared within the framework of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The identification of children associated with all armed groups is therefore becoming a high priority so as to separate child combatants from the formal disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process for adults to ensure that they receive the special care and services required.

56. Since 2007 in Bangui, a system of prevention of sexual violence and of legal, medical and psychosocial assistance has been implemented by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). A referral system has also been put into place within the refugee populations, with focal points of each nationality who are trained to sensitize and assist their community. Medical and community workers of the National Commission for Refugees have also been trained on sexual and gender-based violence, and in the Sam Ouandja refugee camp, sensitization sessions have been organized by the International Medical Corps.

57. With support from UNHCR, UNICEF and other donors, the International Rescue Committee has focused its work in the Central African Republic on support of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Its core programme activities include referral and medical treatment of sexual assault survivors within IRC-supported health facilities; permanent psychosocial support and counselling in these facilities; IRC-operated mobile clinics; psychosocial follow-up of survivors within their communities; and information/sensitization on sexual and gender-based violence issues for populations living on the axis between Kaga Bandoro and Ouandago (central north). Since the beginning of the intervention in September 2008, IRC has registered and provided medical and psychosocial support to a total 1,183 survivors in Nana-Grebizi. IRC successfully discharged 83 per cent of patients from this caseload following completion of both medical and psychosocial treatment. To date, IRC is operating with a caseload of 202 patients in Nana-Grebizi, and since initiating services in October 2008 in Ouham-Pendé, a steady stream of survivors have been reporting to the IRC sexual and gender-based violence programme to access medical and psychosocial support. This underlines the need for strengthened sexual and gender-based violence/health-related interventions in Ouham-Pendé (north-west).

58. Since August 2006, a joint UNICEF-BONUCA-UNHCR training has been targeting MICOPAX and some FACA contingents in Ouham and Ouham-Pendé (north-west). To date, more than 500 peacekeepers and 148 FACA, gendarmes and police officers have been trained in international humanitarian law, prevention of gender-based violence, and on child protection issues, with a focus on the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups and Security Council resolution 1612 (2005). In the same vein, a joint training plan of action has been designed and formally agreed with the Ministry of

Defence for the systematic training of the Presidential Guard, who have been identified as systematically committing violations against the population.

59. Sensitization on child protection of UFDR troops began in June 2007 with the training of a first group of 150 UFDR combatants, including commanders and 49 children who were still associated to the group as soldiers at that time. However, limited access in the Vakaga region has impeded this process. A similar process is currently under way in the context of an IRC initiative that targets APRD combatants in the north-west and central north.

60. As a response to regional and cross-border issues relating to children such as abductions, displacements and recruitment, a framework of collaboration is currently being tested between the UNICEF Child Protection Sections in the Central African Republic and Chad. Coordination will include the exchange of relevant information and lessons learned, occasional meetings of staff from the respective field offices, and coordinated mechanisms. Considering the regional dimension of conflicts, such collaboration has become a crucial part of the programmatic response against the grave violations described earlier.

VI. Recommendations

61. I call on all parties to the conflict to immediately and without precondition cease the recruitment and use of children and to identify and release to the United Nations those children already in their ranks. All parties must, as a matter of priority, enter into dialogue with the United Nations to prepare time-bound action plans to address the recruitment and use of child soldiers in the framework of resolution 1612 (2005), and on the basis of the criteria established for the action plans.

62. All parties to the conflict as well as other armed elements should make specific commitments with a view to putting an end to all the grave violations against children for which they are cited in my reports.

63. UFDR and APRD need to fully implement their commitments to my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and to UNICEF and to continue the process of identification and release of children in their ranks; I request UNICEF and other United Nations system agencies to facilitate this process as appropriate.

64. I welcome the recent progress related to the Inclusive Political Dialogue process and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and entreat all parties concerned to ensure that issues concerning children are taken into full consideration throughout the implementation of the Agreement and in the post-conflict recovery and reconstruction phases. I encourage the Government of the Central African Republic, with the support of the United Nations, to develop and establish appropriate institutional arrangements to ensure that children are prioritized in the reconstruction and development processes.

To the Government of the Central African Republic

65. I call on the Government of the Central African Republic to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and to translate its provisions into national law, including through the criminalization of underage recruitment. Furthermore, I urge

the Government to undertake the necessary reform of national law to bring domestic legislation into line with commitments that have been made under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

66. In addition, I appeal to the Government to address the prevailing culture of impunity for grave violations against children, including child recruitment, sexual violence and abductions, through rigorous investigation and prosecution of those responsible for such crimes. This should include the prosecution of members of FACA and of the Presidential Guard where evidence exists of abuses perpetrated by them. The Government should also, in the context of security sector reform, ensure systematic child protection training for military and police personnel and strengthen the child protection capacity of law enforcement and judiciary officials.

67. I am deeply concerned about the recruitment and use of children by local self-defence militias and their use as auxiliary forces for military operations of the Government of the Central African Republic. The Government must ensure that such recruitment is prevented and that those children associated with militias are identified and released to child protection actors as a matter of priority.

68. To ensure greater protection of vulnerable populations, especially children and internally displaced persons, I encourage the Government to reinforce the capacity of national security forces such as the Gendarmerie in areas of prevailing insecurity such as in the north-west and in the south-east of the Central African Republic.

69. In accordance with Security Council resolution 1612 (2005), the Government of the Central African Republic should fully cooperate with the United Nations task force to implement the monitoring and reporting mechanism. In this regard a high-level focal point should be appointed within the Government to liaise with the task force and follow up and coordinate on child protection issues.

70. Furthermore, I recommend that the Government establish an inter-ministerial task force that will be responsible for coordinating actions within the Government and with the United Nations related to child disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, in line with the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups.

To the United Nations system

71. My Special Representative for the Central African Republic and other relevant United Nations entities will need to ensure that systematic dialogue is established between the United Nations and relevant parties to the conflict for the preparation of action plans to address the recruitment and use of child soldiers in the framework of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005), and for specific commitments by these parties to address all other grave violations.

72. Furthermore, all relevant United Nations entities and their NGO partners must strengthen their efforts in support of the national authorities and civil society and to expand the scope of their child protection programming, monitoring and advocacy.

73. Together with UNICEF, my Special Representative in the Central African Republic, will need to ensure the strengthening and sustainability of the task force on monitoring and reporting; to liaise with relevant NGOs and civil society networks, and national institutions as appropriate; and to ensure effective

collaboration and coordination of child protection activities in the framework of the task force.

74. I request my Special Representative in the Central African Republic to designate as a matter of priority a Child Protection Adviser in BONUCA to ensure and coordinate with other United Nations actors the implementation of relevant provisions of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005), including the monitoring and reporting mechanism, and child protection dialogue with the parties to the conflict.

75. Given the regional dimension of the conflict, I reiterate the recommendation in my report on the situation of children in Chad (S/2008/532) that the respective United Nations country teams in the Central African Republic, Chad and the Sudan, as well as the BONUCA, MINURCAT and African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur political and peacekeeping missions dedicate the required resources to ensure that mechanisms are in place for information exchange and cooperation on cross-border child protection concerns such as the recruitment, release and reintegration of children.

To the donor community

76. I welcome the inclusion of the Central African Republic in the agenda of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission and the funds that have been specifically allocated for child reintegration through the Peacebuilding Fund, and I appeal to the international community, including the World Bank and other actors, to undertake more long-term commitment of resources for United Nations operational agencies, international and national non-governmental organizations and civil society for child protection activities, including for monitoring, reporting and response.